

BOOKS

An Original guru and pseud

Fiona MacCarthy reviews the life and times of the poetic Hindu sage and swami of Forties London

GLYNN BOYD HARTE



TAMBIMUTTU
Bridge Between Two Worlds
Edited by Jane Williams
Peter Owen, £25

Tambimuttu arrived in London from Ceylon in 1938 with nimble fingers, a seraphic smile, and (unusual in those days) a long loose silky mane of hair. He claimed to be a prince at home, and he intended to become the prince of poetry in London. He was only 23. Geoffrey Grigson christened him quickly Tutti-Frutti. There was something about his cast of mind and ways with women that a certain sort of Englishman at once and instinctively disliked.

We hear more from the admirers than detractors in this volume, which is what is called a *Festschrift* and so by definition favourable to the subject, though it is always possible to read between the lines. The 60 contributors of memories of Tambi provide a vivid picture of the chaotic character who founded and edited *Poetry London*, one of the few small magazines to survive in wartime, and who virtually invented

wild man, like me." England, on the edge of war, was ready for the riot of the emotions Tambi offered. The covers of *Poetry London* were designed with regulation lyre birds, symbols of pure ecstasy, in versions by Sutherland and Moore and Ceri Richards. Tambi, looking back, attributed the upsurings of ecstasy to his childhood visits to the Hindu temples. These liberated and exhilarated all his senses "like a plate of very hot rice and curry".

took baths extremely rarely, but an office girl recruited to provide a wash-and-whipping reported that, surprisingly, his smell was baby-sweet.

In London in the wartime Tambi was successful because he was so *different*: the brown face in the white city; the pacifist in wartime. (He would playfully flick over the medals of the warriors returning to the Wheatshaf.) In the Fifties in America the magic seemed to leave him. The explanation offered by Robin Waterfield, most acid and enlightening of writers about Tambi, the spectre at the *Festschrift*, is probably the true one: that New York had become blasé about gurus. It had had too many holy men of wisdom of its own.

If I were choosing examples for a study of the derelict interior I should certainly go for Tambimuttu. He specialized in the literary bed-sit: unmade bed, strewn books and beer cans, and the lopsided (signed) portrait of T. S. Eliot hung up on a nail. In New York, as he drank and drugged himself into oblivion, his succession of apartments, stopovers, and hovels got starker and more desperate, suffused with ancient curries. Yes, there is an awful lot of assorted curry in this book.

Tambi was a flower-power person long before that movement was defined. In the 1960s he came into his own again, consorting with the Beatles (in the Maharishi period) and producing a few numbers of *Poetry London/Apple Magazine*. Tambi was a crashing snob, and he adored the Royal Family. One of his last projects was a grandiose edition of *Indian Love Poems*, illustrated by John Piper. He sent a personal copy to the Queen of England, choosing as

The leg... reali... man or

To read a biography of Mahatma Gandhi in India just now is to be forced to reflect on what was, what might have been, and what is just mere political fancy. The name, no doubt, is hallowed; but there is more pious lip service than practical politics in the public memory. Had he lived, Gandhi might not have recognized India today. If he had been told it was India, he would not have liked what he saw.

Yet, like a mantra, he has become a legitimizing cliché conferring respectability. Mahatma Gandhi Marg (ring road) was intended as a tribute, but the hurtling, fuming lorries that choke its badly tarred surface represent everything about urban industrialization he despised. Gandhi would have preferred to see disbanded even the Congress Party, which allegedly espoused his ideals. So, to understand the man, his life, and his thoughts one has to escape from the realities and aspirations of India into the biographer's past.

Judith Brown's book is not a chronological study, but an interpretation and an analysis. To her Gandhi's relevance is that "as a man of his time who asked the deepest questions, even though he could not answer them, he became a man for all times and all places." Gandhi's philosophy was predicated on his belief in the ultimate triumph of truth, and on the assumption that each individual

guru and pseud

Tambimuttu arrived in London from Ceylon in 1938 with nimble fingers, a seraphic smile, and (unusual in those days) a long loose silky mane of hair. He claimed to be a prince at home, and he intended to become the prince of poetry in London. He was only 23. Geoffrey Grigson christened him quickly Tutti-Frutti. There was something about his cast of mind and ways with women that a certain sort of Englishman at once and instinctively disliked.

We hear more from the admirers than detractors in this volume, which is what is called a *Festschrift* and so by definition favourable to the subject, though it is always possible to read between the lines. The 60 contributors of memories of Tambi provide a vivid picture of the chaotic character who founded and edited *Poetry London*, one of the few small magazines to survive in wartime, and who virtually invented Fitzrovia, an Indianate country of vagabonds and *sadhakas* or seekers, in which he occupied the man of wisdom role.

Who was Tambi? Fact or fiction? Genius or charlatan? The best thing in the book is "Swami Rock, Raga Rock", Tambi's own evocative story of his upbringing. In it he explains the Indian propensity for changing clothes and reversing personalities. Tambi himself had their inherited techniques. He would mesmerize people, with the stillness of the snake charmer. And then he would vanish in a little puff of smoke.

He loved ecstasy, a quality that seems to have endeared him to T. S. Eliot, if not the Hampstead rationalists. Eliot welcomed him to England. With his childlike perceptiveness Tambi made the comment: "Mr Eliot is really a

TAMBIMUTTU Bridge Between Two Worlds

Edited by Jane Williams
Peter Owen, £25

wild man, like me."

England, on the edge of war, was ready for the riot of the emotions Tambi offered. The covers of *Poetry London* were designed with regulation lyre birds, symbols of pure ecstasy, in versions by Sutherland and Moore and Ceri Richards.

Tambi, looking back, attributed the upsurings of ecstasy to his childhood visits to the Hindu temples. These liberated and exhilarated all his senses "like a plate of very hot rice and curry".

As it happened, Tambi was himself a poet. On the basis of the poems included in this collection it is tempting to conclude he was not a very good one. *Gita Sarasvati*, *A Theology for Modern Science* is a psychedelic version of *The Waste Land*, with far too much about those Cosmic Geese and Ganders. Tambi's talent was for bringing out the poetry in others. He believed that *everyman* had poetry within him, a mystical principle he took to its logical conclusion by handing out his grant for editorial expenses to the man who came to clean the windows at his flat.

Tambimuttu was the ultimate consultant of the navel. As described by a girl-groupie — a number of whom contribute fondly to this *Festschrift* — he

returning to the (vibrant!) in the Fifties in America the magic seemed to leave him. The explanation offered by Robin Waterfield, most acid and enlightening of writers about Tambi, the spectre at the *Festschrift*, is probably the true one: that New York had become blasé about gurus. It had had too many holy men of wisdom of its own.

If I were choosing examples for a study of the derelict interior I should certainly go for Tambimuttu. He specialized in the literary bed-st: unmade bed, strewn books and beer cans, and the lopsided (signed) portrait of T. S. Eliot hung up on a nail. In New York, as he drank and dragged himself into oblivion, his succession of apartments, stopovers, and hovels got starker and more desperate, suffused with ancient curries. Yes, there is an awful lot of assorted curry in this book.

Tambi was a flower-power person long before that movement was defined. In the 1960s he came into his own again, consorting with the Beatles (in the Maharishi period) and producing a few numbers of *Poetry London*/*Apple Magazine*. Tambi was a crashing snob, and he adored the Royal Family. One of his last projects was a grandiose edition of *Indian Love Poems*, illustrated by John Piper. He sent a personal copy to the Queen of England, choosing as his unlikely emissary, David Frost.

You take what you get in a *Festschrift*. What is missing is a serious account of Tambi's relations with his uncle, Ananda Coomaraswamy, who, a generation earlier, made the same unsettling journey from east to west. He too became a fêted figure around London, the acceptable shaman of his age. His was the famous dictum "Every man is a special sort of artist", and he persuaded avid audiences (Eric Gill among them) of the essential sacredness of Hindu erotic art. A biographer of Tambi would need to take account of the role of both the uncle and the nephew in infiltrating Hinduism into English culture. It is a potentially fascinating subject, which sheds interesting light on British attitudes to sex.

mind."

But in fact, for a man who claimed to be so incorporeal, Tambi was remarkably prone to fleshly pleasures. Back in Ceylon, a little voyeur in the making, his glimpses of white women through an open door or window had excited and delighted him. He lost no time in England. In the *Poetry London* office his advances on the secretaries were so frequent and insistent a protective male assistant had to put up his umbrella. Bulmy, barmy Tambimuttu. He

To read a biography of Mahatma Gandhi in India just now is to be forced to reflect on what was, what might have been, and what is just mere political fancy. The name, no doubt, is hallowed: but there is more pious lip service than practical politics in the public memory. Had he lived, Gandhi might not have recognized India today. If he had been told it was India, he would not have liked what he saw.

Yet, like a mantra, he has become a legitimizing cliché conferring respectability. Mahatma Gandhi Marg (ring road) was intended as a tribute, but the hurrying, fuming lorries that choke its badly tarred surface represent everything about urban industrialization he despised. Gandhi would have preferred to see disbanded even the Congress Party, which allegedly espoused his ideals. So, to understand the man, his life, and his thoughts one has to escape from the realities and aspirations of India into the biographer's past.

Judith Brown's book is not a chronological study, but an interpretation and an analysis. To her Gandhi's relevance is that "as a man of his time who asked the deepest questions, even though he could not answer them, he became a man for all times and all places". Gandhi's philosophy was predicated on his belief in the ultimate triumph of truth, and on the assumption that each individual had the capacity for movement because in each there was a spark of divinity. "My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements," he explained, "but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth."

At a personal level this quest called for self-purification. Freedom from material or physical concern was the way to understanding one's self. Hence Gandhi's fads. "If love of food, as much as love of a person or consuming concern over the result of particular actions, threatened his search for truth, then it must be rooted out in the process of self-purification." And truth acknowledged no separation between private and a public life: Gandhi lived his in the open, with even the most personal details revealed for